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ABSTRACT

The University of the District of Columbia and the Washington, D.C., public schools developed a two-year collaborative project, which offered 60 public school teachers of grades 6 through 12 an opportunity to become involved in an intense and critical study of some major classical literary works. Each major classic was paired with a twentieth-century work that represents American culture: Homer's "Odyssey" and Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man"; Cervante's "Don Quixote" and Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman"; Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" and Richard Wright's "Native Son"; and Dante's "Inferno" and Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon." During the first year, three sessions (three weeks in the summer, and four monthly meetings each in the fall and spring) prepared teachers through lectures and discussions on the literary works, as well as on related arts, music, or history. The second year of the project will be devoted to pedagogical applications of the first year's work. (EL)

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The Odyssey: A Journey of Self-Discovery

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The District of Columbia has many institutions of higher learning -- some of the most expensive in the country. However, there is only one state/district university, the University of the District of Columbia. Additionally, the District of Columbia has many school organizations, but only one public school system. Thus, our superintendent is both school superintendent and chief state school officer.

Because of this unusual situation, the venture that I am about to share with you is unique. The University of the District of Columbia--the state supported public institution--and the DC Public Schools developed a two year collaborative project which offered 60 public school teachers, grades 6-12, an opportunity to become involved in an intense and critical study of some major classical literary works. The name of the project is entitled: The Odyssey Theme: A Journey of Self-Discovery.

BACKGROUND FOR THIS PROJECT

During the early sixties and late seventies, the DCPS was swept up in the national trend of deifying mathematics and reading skills as educational priorities; literature was relegated to obscurity. However, in 1973, our school system came to its senses and developed a program in the humanities for the senior high grades with grants from NEH and Titles III and IV of the Elementary and Secondary School Act. We wanted to ensure that the literature component of the English program resumed its rightful emphases. This program was successful for several years; however, in 1982, when an assessment was made of the program, it was discovered that student enrollment in the program had steadily declined. The reason was obvious--the junior high school students hadn't been prepared. Thus, in 1983, a humanities program was developed for grades 7-9 (a literature program with supporting experiences from social studies, art, music and philosophy). When this program was instituted, we discovered that the teachers didn't have the background for teaching the junior high program. The teachers themselves expressed their desire for intensive instruction in understanding and teaching the literature -- particularly folklore, Greek mythology, and the Bible.

The DCPS English Department then turned to the university's College of Liberal and Fine Arts to see what resources it could provide. This seemed a reasonable gesture in as much as the university has been over the years, the teacher training institution for most of the District's public school teachers and has a vested interest in the academic preparation of the District students. The university designed and conducted a summer institute for the junior high humanities teachers and staff development sessions during the following year for these teachers, and without pay.

As a result of this successful liaison, the two institutions decided to work on a project and were desirous of continuing this cooperative and mutually beneficial alliance. We designed this proposal, spent almost a year writing it, and had it funded by NEH for $100,000 with $50,000 matching funds.

WHY THE TITLE?

The idea of journey or quest, is a universal theme in many great works of literature. It was hoped that the teachers would see, as well as their students, the relevancy of this theme to their own lives--this journey of self-discovery, this journey of becoming a person.

THE SELECTION OF TEXTS

When we first started identifying texts, we were foolish. We identified twenty-two texts to be studied in one year. However, we soon saw the "light," as students say, and limited our selection to eight. We selected four classics: Homer's Odyssey, Cervante's Don Quixote, Twain's Huckleberry Finn; and Dantes Inferno.

Each major work was paired with a twentieth-century work which is representative of American culture. By selecting modern analogues to these time-tested classics, we hoped to depict the struggle for self-discovery as some eternal quality, some enduring feature of the human race. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man is paired with the Odyssey. Ellison consciously employed the Odyssey as one of the models for his masterful novel. Both protagonists confront temptations, distractions and similar obstacles, but their odysseys differ in the ways they overcome their difficulties. Odysseus is the classic hero of action who is willing to "take up arms against a sea of troubles," while the invisible man is a comparatively passive, twentieth-century anti-hero who would rather "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." By pairing these two works, we show the fundamental universality of the odyssey theme as we see characters far removed in time and place and culture basically acting out the same epic struggle of man to discover.

During the 1985 fall session, Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman was paired with Don Quixote. Both protagonists are out of touch with reality but are in quest of dreams which they believe, when found, will restore happiness to their world.

During the 1986 spring session, Richard Wright's Native Son will be paired with Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Bigger Thomas and Huck Finn are both adolescents who experience an awakening as a result of their picaresque adventures. However, there are important differences between these two journeys of self-discovery. Huck, floating down the river on a raft with a companion, and Bigger, stumbling along alone on his journey from the tenement room to the death cell, represent

different yet complementary odysseys. Huck's odyssey leads him to a deep revolt against being "civilized" and to a reliance on his innate human instincts. Bigger, on the other hand, is a victim of circumstances, and his course of action is determined, not by his pondering the righness or wrongness of an action, but by an impersonal and hostile environment. Both protagonists finally arrive at an acceptance of self over social conventions; however, Bigger's awakening sense of life begins with an act of violence -- a murder, and Huck's awakening stems from an act of compassion.

In the 1987 spring session of the second year, Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon will be paired with Dante's Inferno, which will have been studied in the previous 1986 fall session. Morrison's protagonist, Milkman, like Dante's makes a descent into himself to discover his past. Milkman's past is a more restricted racial past as compared to Dante's more universal subconscious, but in both journeys the protagonists learn how to escape the pit. The most telling lesson is the inevitable experiencing of the horrors of the world before one can transcend them and move to true self-fulfillment. Milkman has to learn the worst about himself and about his family, things which are forgotten or concealed but which have alienated him from the order of the world. Unlike Dante, however, he has no Beatrice, no supernatural grace to get him finally to heaven; he is limited to human reason and inner strength. Both protagonist, nevertheless, emerge from their "infernos" with an relationship to the world. As a result of his understanding of their journey into the past, Milkman develops an imaginative and responsible human condition as Dante's Inferno did -- the worst is known before the best can be reached in a man's life.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE FOR THE FIRST YEAR

The first year of the project was comprised of three sessions, a three week summer session followed by a fall and a spring session. The fall and spring sessions included four monthly meetings each, which took place on Saturdays. This phase was organized around a lecture-discussion-presentation model. Our strategy was to have lecturers interpret the texts, then to sustain focus on the odyssey theme through group discussions, as explained below. In the summer session, nine lectures were devoted to Homer's Odyssey, the core work in the project, four lectures centered on Ellison's Invisible Man.

Discussion groups of twelve persons each met daily after each lecture. Core lecturers acted as discussion leaders, to pursue issues and questions raised by the lecture or by the readings assigned. Discussion leaders rotated among the groups to give participants exposure to different styles and points of view. Adjunct lectures and presenters also participated in group discussions. To insure that the same theme of the project was pursued, the following questions, focused on the odyssey theme, were developed for group discussions (discussions were not necessarily limited to these questions):

1. In what ways is the protagonist a representative figure of his culture and in what ways does he embody its values?

2. Is he in any way an outsider?

3. What is the nature of the protagonist's experiences and does he undergo significant change as a result of them?

4. What is the nature of the protagonist's journey--spiritual, physical, psychological?

5. How has the protagonist grown as a result of his journey?

Afternoon presentations were either supplementary lectures, or art, music, or film presentations. To help sharpen perception of the core text, a scholar presented two historical lectures--one, on the dating of the Odyssey, and the other, on the rich historical data related to Mycenaean culture contained in this great epic. One other supplementary historical lecture on the Harlem Renaissance and its aftermath examined the conflicts between black Communist sympathizers and Garvey's black nationalists in Harlem.

The fine arts were brought to bear on the literary texts. A lecture with musical illustrations on the music and musical instruments of ancient Greece and a presentation of Monteverdi's opera "II Ritorno d'Ulisse" demonstrated the textural richness and inspired ideas which emanated from this remarkable epic poem. A scholar/musician presented a lecture-demonstration on the Blues, stressing the structure of this art form. In a follow-up group discussion, the Invisible Man was examined as a "Blues Novel."

In the plastic arts, a practicing artist/art historian presented two lectures with slide presentation -- on early Greek art from the Geometric period through the Archaic and Classical periods (900 - 300 B.C.), and the other, on the Hellenistic period (348 - 146 B.C.). The lecturer stressed the theme of individualism in Greek art and its relationship to Homer's Odyssey. There was also a lecture/presentation on Afro-American art from the Harlem Renaissance to the present, stressing the political and black nationalistic statements made by Harlem Renaissance artists. In addition to these music and art presentations, two films ("Ulysses," starring Kirk Douglas, and "Ragtime") were viewed, the former then discussed in a follow-up workshop.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE FOR THE SECOND YEAR

The second year, comprised of three sessions, will be devoted to pedagogical applications of the first year's work. The three week session will be used to develop curriculum units, using the odyssey theme and the texts studied as their basis. In the fall, the new curriculum units will be implemented in participant schools, with on-site visits by administrative staff. In the spring the curriculum will be evaluated, with recommendations for revision or expansion. At the end of the second year, an additional cadre of teachers who are desirous of using the materials will meet with core lecturers, and at the last meeting, in another forum, they will discuss ways of expanding the odyssey theme, through different works, to a group including new teachers.

HOW PARTICIPANTS WERE CHOSEN

The sixty teacher participants have committed themselves for the full two-year project. In turn they will receive a stipend of $200 per week for each summer session and $40 per Saturday meeting for each of two fall and two spring sessions, for a total of $1720 each for the entire project. In addition, all textbooks needed for study will be provided free of charge to participants.

Since sixth-grade teachers must ensure that students have the skills for entry into the junior high school program and junior high school teachers must prepare students for the more complex and sophisticated experiences they will encounter in senior high, 10 elementary teachers and 50 secondary (English) teachers were admitted to the program. Priority was given to teams of two or more teachers from the same school; a balanced representation of teachers from different regions of the DCPS system and from different types of organizational units (elementary schools, middle schools, and elementary schools extended; grades kindergarten through nine schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools); teachers who are willing and able to develop curriculum materials for use in their schools.

This project is especially significant for it signals the first time in their histories that the two major public institutions in the nation's capital have been federally funded to execute a joint educational venture.